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ABSTRACT

Using James Britton's model of discourse as a touchstone, this paper develops a theoretical base for writing instruction in adult literacy programs. The paper explores writing from an interactionist perspective that views writing as a complex recursive process in which the writer builds meaning with a text according to the purposes for writing, the intended audience, the mode in which writing is done, and the context in which the writing is done. The paper argues that writing is both a personal and a social process that requires engagement between writer and audience--either other people or the writer's "generalized other." In addition, it argues that writing is a process by which writers not only communicate with others, but also learn and create . After exploring writing from this perspective, the paper discusses the immediate implications of such a view for adult literacy instruction, looking specifically at the relationship between writing and adult literacy as a developmental process. (FL)

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Writing in the Adult Literacy Program: A Theoretical Base

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My purpose in this article is to develop a theoretical base for writing instruction in adult literacy programs. I will explore writing from an interactionist perspective which views writing as a complex recursive process whereby one builds meaning with a text according to one's purposes for writing, one's intended audience, the mode in which one is writing, and the contextual situation in which one is writing. According to this perspective, writing is both a personal and social process which requires engagement between writer and audience, either other people or one's "generalized other." It is a process by which one not only communicates with others, but also by which one learns and creates oneself. I will use Britton's (1978; 1982) model of discourse as my touchstone.

After exploring writing from this particular perspective, I will then discuss the immediate implications of such a view for adult literacy instruction. Specifically, I will look at the relationship between writing and adult literacy as a developmental process.

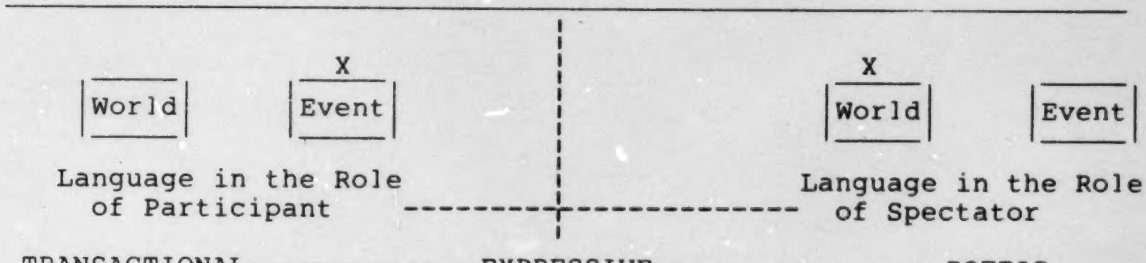
Britton's Model of Discourse and Adult Literacy Instruction

Britton (1978; 1982) discusses language use in terms of its purposes or functions. He says that there are three major categories of functions: transactional, expressive, and poetic:

> Transactional is the form of discourse that most fully meets the demands of a participant in events (using language to get things done, to carry out a verbal transaction).
>
> Expressive is the form of discourse in which the distinction between participant and spectator is a shadowy one.
>
> Poetic discourse is the form that most fully meets the demands associated with the role of spectator--demands that are met, we suggested, by MAKING something with language rather than DOING something with it. (Britton, 1982, p. 53)

Britton (1982, p. 106) diagrams these functions or uses of language in the following manner:

BRITTON'S MODEL OF DISCOURSE



"X" represents the individual

In transactional writing the individual assumes the role of a participant who is writing to get something done. Language is used as a means or a tool to do something. As the above diagram illustrates, the individual who is writing in the role of participant is engaged in the specific event within a specific context and is not attempting to incorporate or relate that specific event to a total world view. For example, a woman writing a letter of complaint to the manufacturer of a defective kitchen appliance is using language to express dissatisfaction. She is not using the complaint as a means to understanding the world.

In poetic writing the individual's focus is no longer on the specific event but on something that is not now happening. One is able in the role of spectator to look at the way in which the specific event relates to and affects one's total world view. "In spectator role, we are free from the need to interact. Our attention is upon events that are not happening, interactions with people that are not now present" (Britton, 1982, pp. 104-5). However, Britton continues, poetic writing does not mean strictly poetry in its usual sense of rhyme and meter; "poetry is certainly at the core of it, but it is not the whole of it. By poetic I mean language as art ... something made, a verbal object" (Britton, 1982, p. 106).

In poetic writing one is concerned about the forms of language in a manner that one isn't when one writes in the role of participant. For example, consider again the woman who wrote the letter of complaint to the manufacturer of the defective kitchen appliance. If sometime later she decides that the appliance, the

letter, and the manufacturer's response all serve to illustrate certain ludicrous aspects of a consumer-based, technological society and accordingly writes a witty, satirical short story based on this series of events for the New Yorker, then the emphasis will be on using language not necessarily to do something, but to make something.

Expressive writing, Britton says, is the matrix from which transactional and poetic writing develop. This is the language closest to self. It is context-dependent, personal, unstructured, and free from any outside demands to do or make something. Expressive writing calls attention to self and is used for exploring and learning about oneself, one's feelings toward something, one's present understanding of something, and so on. As Britton observes, expressive writing is the "shadowy" region between transactional and poetic writing and is, therefore, a mixture of fact, feeling, emotion, intuition, observation, and belief. For example, if the woman sits down after smashing the new but defective kitchen appliance with a hammer and begins writing in her diary or journal in order to explore and discover why she became so outraged and violent, then she is using writing in an expressive manner to focus on and understand her feelings, her reaction, and her self.

These three major functions of language and the roles which an individual plays when writing are not so easily separated. All three of the functions may be present at any one time; nevertheless, one function will be dominant. The expressive function most clearly

reveals this complex relationship among the three. For example, after exploring in her diary her violent reaction to the defective kitchen appliance, the woman can move toward the participant role and write a letter of complaint or she can move toward the poetic role and focus on creating an imaginative, new interpretation or understanding of the event by writing a short story. In either case, the expressive is the matrix from which the other writing develops. Likewise, in either case there will also probably be some elements or aspects of the other function involved; that is, while writing the letter of complaint she is still concerned secondarily about the form of the letter, about using just the right words to express her anger; and while writing the short story she is still secondarily concerned about affecting the way people think about manufacturers of kitchen appliances.

One must also consider, of course, that an individual is always an individual-in-society. One must remember, as Britton points out, that an individual's world view, understanding of self, purposes for writing, and sense of audience are all developed through interaction with others in specific social contexts and are shaped by the feedback and perspectives of other people within those contexts. The functions of writing cannot be separated from their social uses. Thus, one does not only use writing in social situations to get a deeper and more adequate understanding of self and the world, but also uses writing as a means of social interaction to communicate, express, and help create oneself and one's world.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for adult literacy, Britton says that "as participants we APPLY our value systems, but as spectators we GENERATE AND REFINE the system itself" (Britton, 1982, p. 51). Using language as a tool, writing to do something, does not allow individuals an opportunity to step back and examine their value systems as a whole; it does not allow them the opportunity to contextualize into a coherent system the value of their particular acts. And this lack of understanding is compounded when the values that they are asked or required to apply may not be their own. The utilitarian, "survival" writing skills which are presented in most functional competency programs of adult literacy are precisely such impositions. Adults are told that they must be able to do certain kinds of writing before they are considered literate or competent. They are required to apply certain values as they engage in these writing activities. For example, there is a complex value system at work when unemployed adult beginning readers and writers are taught to fill out practice employment applications for jobs which may not exist and may not ever exist.

And this is where Britton's theory of discourse in general and writing in particular becomes especially important. Any theory of adult literacy which imposes upon adults an explicit or implicit value system, a way of seeing the world, without allowing them to participate in the creation of that system and world view is a theory which advocates domination, regardless of how seemingly "humanitarian" or "socially conscious" it appears. It is a theory

which imposes the status-quo view of the world upon individuals. As Freire (1970; 1978) contends, adults must be able to analyze critically themselves, their world, and their place in the world, and then must act on this analysis. They do this through social dialogue and encounter. And I would add to Freire's contention that analysis and action will only have meaningful effect if they occur within a context of face-to-face communal sharing and interaction. Small is not only beautiful, it is necessary for community and individual power and well-being.

Britton's view of the writing process captures this complex process whereby one explores, learns about, understands, creates oneself, moves into the world as an active participant, and then steps back and analyzes, generates, and refines one's value system and understanding of the world. Thus, writing is both a functional and developmental process. Britton's view of the writing process is powerful because it captures not only the whole range of individuals as writers, but also because it places individuals in the larger social context within which they interact. Accordingly, I maintain that any theory of adult literacy which does not acknowledge the importance of the expressive and poetic functions of language in general and writing in particular, as well as the usual importance placed on the transactional function, is not a theory of empowerment but instead a theory of domination.

Adult Literacy as a Developmental Process

What does it mean to say that writing begins in what is closest to self and is both a functional and developmental process; what are the implications for adult literacy? What does it mean to say that writing is a risk-taking process that one learns only by writing? How does an adult learn how to play the whole range of writing? In this section of the article I want to focus on such questions by discussing writing instruction from within the more inclusive context of adult literacy. I want to look at adult literacy as a developmental process.

Reading and writing theoreticians, researchers, and teachers generally recognize the fact that literacy acquisition is a gradual long-term developmental process which begins quite early for most children growing up in a print-saturated society. Research into children's use of print continues to push back the age at which children are attempting to use print in some meaningful manner. One reads of research studies involving three and four-year-old children (Harste, Burke, and Woodward, 1981). The child's facility, power, and range with reading and writing develop as the child grows cognitively, emotionally, and physically. Hundreds, probably thousands, of articles and books are designed to help the teacher foster the further development of students' reading and writing abilities, whether the students are of elementary, secondary, or college age.

It strikes me as odd, therefore, to find that most adult literacy programs and instructional materials and practices ignore the fact that facility, power, and range in reading and writing ability do not spring like Athene from Zeus' head. Most adult literacy programs and materials are based on the assumption, either explicitly or implicitly stated, that literacy development can occur in a relatively short period of time. Admittedly, a 30-year-old brings a tremendous amount of world knowledge, language facility, and so forth to the reading and writing processes that a 10-year-old does not. Nonetheless, learning to read different texts for different purposes and learning to play the whole range in writing take time, experience, feedback, and developing awareness. An adult beginning reader and writer does not become proficient after six months or a year's study. As Goethe, quoted in Guthrie and Kirsch (1983, p. 22), said toward the end of his long life: "The dear people do not know how long it takes to learn to read. I have been at it all my life and I cannot yet say I have reached the goal."

Why then are most adult literacy programs and instructional materials based on the assumption that literacy can be acquired in a relatively short period of time? Why, for example, are the literacy training programs in the Army of such short duration that they have little effect (Ryan and Furlong, 1975)? I think this is so because they are based on a corresponding assumption that literacy is something that can be acquired and not developed. Literacy is perceived to be some set of skills which an adult can get from

someone else within the context of a classroom or perhaps within the context of a tutoring situation. This view and the assumptions on which it is based necessarily result in literacy training rather than literacy development. It results in the reductive kinds of instruction which train an adult to manipulate certain types of surface language conventions in a very restricted range of situations; it results in "survival" literacy training or competency training of one kind or another. And it is precisely here that the criticism of those who contend that literacy training is often little more than a means of social control and manipulation is relevant (see, for example, Levine, 1983).

Moreover, I believe such assumptions that literacy development is a short term process are ultimately harmful to adult students themselves. They develop false hopes and fond illusions in the adult students that they can become proficient readers and writers in a short period of time. These false hopes and fond illusions are not only often encouraged by the assumptions of literacy educators and the short term nature of many literacy programs, but also by the popular media. For example, the television movie, The Pride of Jessee Hallam depicts a man who goes from being unable to read a single word to reading The Old Man and the Sea after two months of instruction. When such expectations are not immediately realized in their own lives, adults often become discouraged, and stop trying.

Miller (1983) maintains that literacy not only involves learning how to act within social situations for social purposes, but also how to act within the space of texts:

> When textual context as well as cultural context is essential to describe writing, literacy also is necessarily a textual tool, the ability to act within the world of texts. Writing in this view is not only a way to act as a citizen, professional, worker, or socially-adjusted person, but is also a way of acting in the relived, reflective, interior space of textual interactions. (Miller, 1983, p. 228)

Of course, the same observation can be made for reading. The important point here is that most adult literacy instruction ignores the "interior space of textual interactions," or the problem space of written language. The perhaps often times over-emphasis on a functional approach to literacy instruction quite often degenerates into a restricted kind of training for a narrow range of specific purposes. This restricted functional approach tends to ignore or slight the fact that the space or world inside texts is as "real" as the world outside texts. The plums inside a poem by William Carlos Williams are as "real" as the plums inside my refrigerator.

Thus, although I have also been stressing a functional approach to literacy instruction, my conception of "functional" includes the ability to act within the world of texts. Reading a poem for wonder and joy is just as valid a function as reading an employment application. From my own experience with adult beginning readers and writers, it has usually been poetry and song lyrics--the seemingly most expendable things, the things which competency-based approaches to literacy instruction ignore utterly--

which have been the most effective with them. After learning how to act within the space of different poems by reading and writing them, after learning how to interpret and manipulate the compressed and symbolic world inside lyric poems, after connecting the world inside the poems to their own lives, the adults have been better able to move out from the poetry to other functions of reading and writing.

Finally, the adult literacy instructor's perspective of the adult students is of utmost importance. I have participated in more exciting and insightful discussions of lyric poetry and have seen more imaginative and powerful poetry written in sessions with supposedly "illiterate" adults than I have in many college classrooms because I have assumed that the adults are ready now for the best, and not sometime in the distant future only after they have mastered certain basic skills. The most obvious and immediate implication for adult literacy instruction is that I believe it should begin, in Britton's terms, in the expressive and poetic and not necessarily in the transactional. Howell (1982), speaking of writing development, advocates an approach that is directly relevant to the point I am making here. She says that

> the effective use of words and sentences for communication can be developed by a program which stresses not mechanics, but personal involvement in writing. As students use language to symbolize their experience, they will become more skillful at symbol-making. Because they are involved with their writing, because it is theirs, they will write more fluently and effectively. (Howell, 1982, p. 197)

By beginning in the expressive and the poetic, the adult literacy instructor is better able to incorporate and use the individual adult's frame of reference, schemata, cognitive abilities,

and unique personality. Such an approach allows the anxious, frustrated, or self-deprecating adult the space and opportunity to explore written language in a non-threatening manner. There is no "correct" answer to a poem, song, or language experience story as there is to a workbook exercise. Poetry reading and writing and language experience stories encourage group discussion and social interaction. They allow individuals to raise their own cognitive questions and to seek their own answers. Moreover, they allow individuals to test their private understanding against the understanding of others. Such an approach not only combines reading with writing but also gives the adults an opportunity to express and create as well as to analyze and communicate.

An approach to adult literacy instruction which begins in the expressive and poetic focuses on the unique individual with all of those unique experiences, hopes, fears, loves and hates. It centers directly on the interior world of the texts being read or written, but also on the social context in which reading and writing take place. Such an approach focuses on the actual processes of reading and writing, the feedback from others, and how the adult relates all of these things to self and the world. For as the most American, most "simple, sensuous, and passionate" poet, William Carlos Williams (1962, p. 178), tells us, life is more than ratiocination:

> Are facts not flowers
> and flowers facts
> or poems flowers
> or all works of the imagination,
> interchangeable?

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